Dockworkers' resistance and union reform within China's globalised seaport industry

Xuebing Cao
Keele Management School, Keele University/UK

and

Quan Meng
School of Labour Economics, Capital University of Economics and Business/China

ABSTRACT *This study examines the prominent 2013 Yantian dock strike in China and analyses the main factors contributing to the dockers' successful campaign. It finds that dockers' capacity to take strike action mainly derives from their bargaining power, including structural power such as workplace bargaining power and logistical power, and their institutional power such as workers' sense of moral power. More importantly, the event shows that the extent of dock workers' resistance, workplace union reform and employers' response were shaped by the globalisation of production in China's seaport industry and the transformation of political economy in East Asia.*

Key words: Dockers, strike, union reform, China

Xuebing Cao is Lecturer in human resource management at Keele Management School, Keele University, UK. His research interests include health professionals' pay, the emerging issues of trade unionism and migrant workers in China.

Quan Meng is Lecturer in employment relations and labour study in the School of Labour Economics, Capital University of Economics and Business, China. His research focuses on Chinese workers' collective action, trade unions, government intervention in labour protests and theories of employment relations.

Correspondence address:
Xuebing Cao, Keele Management School, Keele University, Staffordshire ST5 5AZ, UK. E-mail: x.cao@keele.ac.uk

Introduction

On 1 September 2013, hundreds of gantry and tower crane operators lodged a non-union strike in Yantian International Containers Terminal (YICT) and paralysed the world's biggest single site container handling port, in Shenzhen, China (CLB, 2013; T. Wang, 2014). After two days' mediation and negotiation, the dispute was settled with the workers' victory against their employer, Hutchison Port Holdings (HPH), one of the biggest global port operators, demonstrating the dockworkers' impressive bargaining power. Coincidentally, the event happened only four months after the end of a bitter and lengthy dispute in nearby Hong Kong International Terminals, which is also owned by HPH (Cheng, 2014, p.218). The strike showed Yantian dockworkers' persistent struggles against transnational capital within China's globalised seaport industry, adding to the recent wave of collective unrest protesting the labour regime in China (Gray, 2015). It is surprising, however, that there was not adequate media coverage on the 2013 dispute, or in-depth academic studies.

Following China's dramatic economic development, including the expansion of the transport industry, Chinese workers have enjoyed more employment opportunities, but many have also experienced low pay and poor working conditions. Yet the labour movement has been hindered by the country's unitary industrial relations system and the malfunctioning official union organisation, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which remains 'categorically opposed to worker mobilisation' (Friedman and Lee, 2010, p.524).

Often Chinese unions can only manoeuvre between the government and labour, because they must balance their dual institutional identity – as government affiliates on the one hand, and workers' organisations on the other (Chen, 2010, p.108).

Despite the lack of organised labour movements, Chinese workers' unorganised collective resistance is not uncommon as industrial conflicts have grown significantly in recent years. Labour unrest, supported by workers' growing awareness of rights protection, is based on their disruptive capacity in response to globalised capital relocation and restructuring (Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000). Yet Chinese workers' resistance, such as the 2013 Yantian dispute that reflects dockers' bargaining power and the state of labour organisations, is also grounded in the development of labour agencies that are shaped by national and international environments. As Gray (2015) states, labour relations in East Asia is characterised with workers' resistance against global capitalism and subordination in various processes of 'passive revolution' both within and beyond workplaces. Meanwhile, it is important to acknowledge the essence of cultural, organisational and political dynamics for the formation of workers' class consciousness (Koo, 2001). In this context, the 2013 Yantian strike poses a number of interesting questions: How did the strike break out? What did dockers, workplace union and management do during the strike? What are the main factors contributing to the dockers' successful campaign? How was the strike linked with dockers'

capacity to disrupt the production? How should we elucidate Yantian workers' bargaining power and the state of workplace union organisation?

To respond to these queries, two fieldwork visits were undertaken between August 2014 and May 2015. Access was obtained through trade unions, so the researchers were able to conduct interviews with 3 union officials and 7 workers. All the workers interviewed experienced the 2013 dispute, with the union officials being involved with the mediation and negotiation process. Data has also been drawn from secondary sources, namely printed and online reports from both foreign and Chinese media. To maintain confidentiality, all the interviewees are anonymous and their names are coded.

The rest of the paper consists of five parts. First, it discusses theories of dock strike by analysing the cultural explanation and dockers' workplace bargaining power, as well as the impact of technology and globalisation. Second, it briefly introduces the organisational context of the 2013 Yantian dispute. The third and fourth parts evaluate the 2013 strike process, with detailed discussion of management's response, workers' bargaining power and mobilisation, and the role of the trade union. The paper concludes by highlighting the dispute's implication for the transformation of Chinese labour movement, and the impact of changing political economy on industrial conflicts in China's globalised seaport industry.

Dockworkers, strikes and bargaining power

Industrial conflict at docks

Ports and shipping are central to the economic globalisation process, as more than 80 per cent of global trade (by weight) with origins or destinations in developing countries is waterborne (Turnbull, 2000, p.376). The degree of industrial peace is vital to docks because workplace conflict can significantly disrupt the transportation of goods within the global shipping line. However, historically, dockers are among those 'strike-prone' occupations that are featured with strong union organisations and frequent mass industrial actions (Hamark, 2013; Hyman, 1984). In Britain, for instance, docks stood out up to the 1980s as 'the most strike-prone sector', with 50 per cent of dockers on strike each year compared with 5 per cent of other non-coal workers (Edwards, 1995, p.451).

The traditional debate about dockers' strike proneness hinged on the extent to which this is associated with dockers' occupational, cultural and organisational characteristic, recurrent grievances and effective union mobilisation. Kerr and Siegel (1954, pp.203-204) attributed this to dockers' isolated mass status, strong sense of closed community, higher degree of internal cohesion and unique identity detached from the external society. Dock work was said to require heavy, physical effort and dangerous operation, with their accident rate being one of the highest in all industrial occupations (Miller, 1969, p.306). Doing physically demanding and dangerous jobs made dockers tough and combative workers who were more likely to strike (Kerr and Siegel, 1954, p.195).

The isolated mass thesis has been questioned by many commentators. As Edwards (1977) puts it, the main reason for frequent conflict in docks is the changing management practices that have generated more grievances. Dockers are not usually exclusively separated from other communities, and the model of workplace relationship should not be a static and isolated one for such claim 'fails to explain variations over time and also within industries' (Edwards, 1995, p.449). Nonetheless, this is not to dismiss the idea of community and the sense of common purpose that can help understand the dynamic character of workplace relations, and dockers' ability to mobilise and sustain collective solidarity (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004, p.345).

However in recent years, docks around the world have become a relatively quieter arena where the frequency of strike has been much less than before (Silver, 2003, pp.99-100). Part of the change is linked to technological innovation largely resulted from the increasingly globalised sea port industry world-wide. In particular, the containerisation and the growing volume of global freight logistics have reshaped the scale of port infrastructure, accompanied with the intensification of global capital investment and the use of labour-saving technology (Hall, 2009, pp.68-69). The deregulation of employment schemes, together with new work practices such as just-in-time and casualisation (Turnbull and Wass, 2007, p.587), has dramatically downsized the historically militant dock labour force and in large part account for the dramatic decline in labour unrest (Silver, 2003, p.111). Yet dockers still possess a

strong sense of solidarity and collectivity (Turnbull, 2000, p.375). While some unions have found it harder to protect members' interests against multinational corporations, many other unions' resistance is more successful (Turnbull and Wass, 2007, p.609). As dockers strive to 'retain control of traditional dock work' (Edwards, 1995, p.452), bitter disputes continue to emerge in the waterfront where dockers keep resisting the threats of job removal and wage squeeze in an increasingly globalised industry.

Bargaining power, globalisation and technology innovation

Another powerful account for dockers' capacity to strike is the notion of bargaining power, including associational power and structural power (Wright, 2000, p.957). Associational power is supported by unions and political parties, while structural power includes market bargaining power that comes from the tight labour market and workplace bargaining power that comes from 'workers' strategic position of a particular group of workers within a key industrial sector' (Wright, 2000, p.962). Associational power can also be moral or symbolic power, involving 'the struggle of "right" against "wrong", providing a basis for an appeal both to the public and politicians, as well as to allies in civil society' (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008, p.12). Workplace bargaining power refers to dockers' bargaining advantage and disruptive potential ability to 'harm distribution, production and profit' (Hamark, 2013, p.279), and their 'remarkable degree of autonomy and control' (Turnbull,

2001, p.367). Dockers are among some jobs that are ‘central to the production process, with a high disruptive potential’ (Martin, 1992, p.36). Because the disruption caused by transport workers’ struggles can usually have high level of deterrent as it will go beyond the transportation and logistics network, they ‘have possessed and continue to possess relatively strong workplace bargaining power’ (Silver, 2003, p.100). In addition, dockers may also possess another type of structural power, logistical power, which can take ‘matters out of the workplace and onto the landscape where workplaces are located’ (Webster et al., 2008, p.13).

For docks around the world, the economic globalisation and technological advancement have had profound influence on the changing dynamics of workplace labour relations. Since the 1950s, containerisation, the foremost port labour-saving technology, has radically altered port-cargo handling methods across the world (Schwarz-Miller and Talley, 2002, p.529). But its impact on dockers’ capacity to strike is not a straightforward picture. On the one hand, dockers’ bargaining power is threatened by improved productivity, increased automation and reduced demand for dock labour force, mainly casual and periphery workers (Martin, 1992, p.170). For instance in the USA, due to the use of new machinery, by the mid-1980s dockworker jobs declined 60 percent compared with the level in the 1970s at most ports (Schwarz-Miller and Talley, 2002, p.529). Job losses and increased substitutability of labour can directly lead to dockers’ decreased market bargaining power, union membership and associational power. Moreover, the automated operation means most dockworkers are

increasingly working in isolated small units, making it harder for them to develop collegiate spirit and solidarity. It also makes the defence of workers' collective interests more difficult due to the increased flexibility of work (Martin, 1992, p.170).

On the other hand, new technologies may enhance core dockers' bargaining power, because now the operation of modern ports, closely integrated with global production and supply chains, is more vulnerable and these skilled dockers could find it easier to disrupt production than before thanks to higher cost related to disruption. First, the expansion of containerised cargo ports has increased the demand for skilled dockworkers that can handle the modern machinery, and reinforced their market and workplace bargaining powers that are derived from their strategic position within the production process. Port employers, meanwhile, are more reluctant to see industrial disputes due to 'the rising costs from disruptions in the utilization of expensive port infrastructures and container ships' (Schwarz-Miller and Talley, 2002, p.529).

Second, dockworker unions have renewed their mobilisation strategies to respond to the changing political and economic environments. For example, after the 1980s, American dock unions increased their campaigns for negotiating work conservation schemes and securing pay rises, and made some gains through these activities (Schwarz-Miller and Talley, 2002, p.528). But meanwhile employers have updated their counter strategies that are also empowered by technological fixes (Silver, 2003, p.101). Third, modern technology is

influential for empowering workers' logistical power. For instance during the 1995-98 Liverpool dock dispute, dockers used the internet to call for international unions' support (Carter, Stewart, Hogan and Kornberger, 2003, p.302). Such logistical power is important as it 'takes structural power outside the workplace and into the public domain' (Webster et al., 2008, p.13). This is not to deny, of course, that the success of a dispute relies on many other factors, such as the employers' strategy, labour market conditions and public support.

Industrial relations in Yantian

The development of YICT

The proliferation of China's container port industry, the world's fastest growing one in recent decades, has been dramatic since the early 1980s. As one of the major destinations for global foreign direct investment and a manufacturing powerhouse, China needs a significant logistic system, such as shipping and ports, to support the economic advancement (Thun, 2014, p.302). Between 1982 and 2000, the annual increase rate of seaport container throughput was more than 10 per cent, with the importance of container cargos to China's sea ports jumping from less than 5 per cent in 1980 to nearly 60 per cent in 1998 (Cullinane, Fei and Cullinane, 2004, p.35). Now China is a dominant player in the international ocean transport sector, and there has been huge amount of investment, including foreign capital, being poured into the country's container transport industry (Cullinane et al., 2004). One of the most prominent

ports is Yantian port (YICT), the country's largest single-site container terminal and the only major seaport controlled by a foreign company.

YICT was established in 1994 as a joint venture, and has been since controlled by Hong Kong based HPH. Yantian port is within a cluster of giant sea ports along China's southern coast line that encompasses over 60 per cent of the country's total container throughput (Cullinane et al., 2004, p.39). In only 20 years, YICT developed 16 large deep-water container berths, becoming the busiest container cargo port in China and a main hub for international shipping in the region (K. Wang, 2014). The company's leading position is reinforced by its location in South China, which is the so-called 'world factory' region offering huge flow of import and export cargoes, making YICT an important part in the global supply chain. On the other hand, YICT's business is often constrained by China's cumbersome customs procedures and 'anything else involving substantial government input' (Cullinane et al., 2004, p.52).

YICT directly employs 2,300 staff, 800 of whom are crane operators (HPH, 2013). In addition, there are 3,000 sub-contracted employees working around the port to provide peripheral and support services. Within its management team is the well-known YICT union (affiliated to the ACFTU) that is branded by the authorities as a 'model workplace union' (T. Wang, 2014). The union distinguishes itself by a 'democratic' direct election system, one of the very few such types in contemporary China as its chair person is elected every three years

(Interview 7); although in fact, this was pushed by Yantian dockworkers in the first place after a high profile dispute in 2007. Nevertheless, the state mediation, in this case a relaxation of the restrict labour regime in a foreign invested port, seems to provide some room for workers' collective resistance and some (limited) degree of union democracy.

The 2007 dispute and union election

The 2007 Yantian union direct election was not a voluntary experiment, rather it was a tentative attempt triggered by the workers' spontaneous strike, which was the result of dockers' grievances over low pay and the lack of employee voice mechanism. A non-union firm at the time, YICT had already been very successful in its expansion, achieving a profit increase of nearly fivefold in the past 10 years (Wang, 2013). But employees did not get a corresponding pay rise for a number of years and their discontent accumulated gradually until a number of crane operators started the strike on 7 April 2007 (CLB, 2013). The walkout resulted in an immediate stoppage of the port operation and serious disruption to the regional supply chain. Dockers' demands included not only better wages, but also the 'somewhat unusual demand to set up their own union, an indication of their desire to exercise greater control over their own workplace' (Friedman and Lee, 2010, p.520). The strike was settled promptly, and workers were soon offered with wage increase and immediate union establishment through election.

As a turning point in China's contemporary labour history, the 2007 YICT union election reform signalled that grassroots union reform became possible. Workers in the nearby region's companies started to follow this model and asked for establishing union organisations, including the high profile 2010 Nanhai Honda strike (Lyddon, Cao, Meng and Lu, 2015). Despite its shortcomings such as the controlled nomination, YICT reform has been regarded as a landmark event (Wang, 2013) and a significant step forward for the ACFTU since never before had any union officials been directly elected in China's transport industry. Yet workers' growing consciousness was not accidental; rather it was deeply rooted in the transformation of the political economy in the region, especially the Chinese government's changing dispute resolution method used to sustain globalised capitalist production (Gray, 2015). After the election the Yantian workplace union played a key role in helping establish wage collective consultation mechanisms and maintain regular union elections. In the following 6 years, through annual wage consultations, employees had a 'steady and continuous pay rise', contributing to what the ACFTU regarded as the 'more harmonious labour relations' and 'increasingly higher working enthusiasm' among dockworkers (Workers Daily, 2011). It seemed that the reform was able to bring in industrial peace, which was kept until September 2013 when a new strike broke out again in YICT.

The 2013 Yantian strike process

The September 2013 Yantian dispute was another unorganised sit-in strike, as workers exercised their bargaining power again through spontaneous and collective action. It is important to note that in early 2013, dockers in Hong Kong Terminals (HIT) held a 40-day strike, which was featured with intense collective bargaining from beginning to end and independent unions that played a leading role. During the event, over 400 dock crane operators demanded a 20 per cent pay rise and better working conditions, paralysing the world's third-busiest container port (wsj.com, 2013). A wide range of societal demonstrations, rallies and donations offered significant political and financial support to the dockers who had been undermined by the limited political space for the labour movement (Cheng, 2014, p.218). The strike was eventually settled with a 9.8 per cent pay rise after the employer endured considerable political and economic pressures. With a 'half-victory' (SCMP, 2013), the Hong Kong dock strike did make workers better understand their labour rights and bargaining power. On the other hand, despite YICT and HIT being both operated by HPH, Yantian dockers were not directly connected with their Hong Kong counterparts working only 50 miles away, because they worked in two completely different systems (labour market, industrial relations climate and legal environment). But the Hong Kong dispute was widely reported by China's official media, including Xinhuanet (2013) that looked at the strike and negotiation processes. Hong Kong dockers' fight against the city's richest tycoon and his sub-contractors was inspirational for colleagues around the world, certainly including those in

Yantian, many of whom had suffered serious pressures from globalisation and intensification of work.

Hiller (1969) pointed out that strikers usually needed to have justifications for their behaviours. To this end, YICT workers' demand for a 2,000 – 3,000 Yuan pay rise was linked with their grievance over the company's changes in housing benefits and education subsidies, something that would see 'workers' net income being cut' (Interview 6). The stoppage happened during the shift change at 8:00 on the Sunday morning, 1 September 2013, initiated by a group of day-shift gantry crane operators, who refused to operate their machinery (T. Wang, 2014). These operators' action was soon followed by more tower crane operators, who also stopped working (CLB, 2013). Admittedly it was not a well-coordinated event since there was no union involvement in the beginning, nor did any striking workers ask the union to step in. Soon the action spread to the majority of the workforce and workers marched around the office building and then gathered in the dining hall discussing their tactics (Interview 7). Despite the union's non-involvement, the dockers were able to stand together with their collective demand, as many of them had experienced the spontaneous strike in 2007.

Over the years, due to management's dominance during the wage consultation process, Yantian dockers' real concerns were rarely taken into account by the company. The 500 Yuan allowance, given to crane operators after the 2007 dispute, gradually lost its importance

as employees in other positions were also awarded similar amount of allowances. In addition, the 9-grade pay structure, being set up after 2007 to reflect a widened gap between different grades, caused many workers' complaints of 'unequal distribution' between similar jobs. For instance, tower crane operators could only be paid about 6,000 Yuan, but gantry crane operators received 9,000 to 10,000 Yuan. Furthermore, in 2013 YICT's implemented a new housing fund policy that saw most employees' net income reduced, and this resulted in grievances among most workers who believed that the company was too mean (T. Wang, 2014). Despite the company's successful business achievement and steady pay rise, workers still felt being unfairly treated and some, especially crane operators, believed that YICT was not generous in paying its employees (Interview 6). The company was said not to care about workers' real concerns. As one crane operator said:

> This housing fund (in 2013) led to a pay cut in real terms compared with our increased contribution. We could only get 5,000 Yuan net income each month and how could you buy property in Shenzhen with such a low income? We have to live and raise our families, especially children. The company should seriously listen to our concerns (Interview 2).

The stoppage was initiated by gantry crane operators that were deeply worried about the loss caused by the housing fund change, although they were paid higher than some other staff in

the port. Just half an hour later, the workplace union officials were called back to the company to help solve the situation and act as mediator. It was a peculiar bargaining scene because managers and workers did not talk face to face, with the union acting as the middle agency passing messages between the two parties (Interview 7). As the company tried, but failed, to persuade workers to resume work, soon the whole Yantian port production stopped and cargo lorries started to form a long queue along the road outside the port (Chinaworker.org, 2013).

The first day's negotiation lasted until two o'clock in the morning, with little progress being made because management refused to make substantial concessions and workers also had different ideas from time to time. Dockers were unable to agree with a clear and consistent target, and it was difficult for strikers to carry on mobilising collective interests when there is no institutional organisation and proper leadership. By next morning the senior official from Shenzhen municipal union came and helped the mediation. Meanwhile, more port employees joined the strike, including most support and control room staff (Interview 6). While the operation was stopped, huge numbers of containers were left in the port without being inspected or loaded/unloaded (Interview 7). The company was also under pressure from the local government, which was 'deeply concerned' about the impact of the strike (CLB, 2013). After a few rounds of intensive talks, a deal was finally struck, and workers

ended the strike at 4 pm in the afternoon. The settlement was to offer all workers an equivalent 30 per cent pay rise, about 1,700 Yuan increase per month (T. Wang, 2014).

YICT, dockworkers and workplace union during the strike

What made the YICT to compromise again?

YICT quickly settled the dispute mainly because the company was worried about the economic and political impact. Economically the company needed to maintain a steady operation and competitive advantage (K. Wang, 2014), and a stable employment relationship is vital for retaining such a position. For YICT, it was sensible to settle the strike swiftly, because in an industry where there is worker flexibility, high capital investment and tightly coupled supply chains, firms tend to prioritise 'the avoidance of disputes' (Martin, 1992, p.181), and this is even more so in globalised container ports (Turnbull and Wass, 2007).

Politically the government and ACFTU did not want any workplace conflict escalated, and the transport industry is a sensitive area for foreign investment (CLB, 2013). The government's key concern was to avoid the domino effect of wider social unrest. For YICT, maintaining a good relationship with the authorities was vital, and a quick settlement could pacify such concern and avoid further loss.

The role of the workplace union

Prior to the walkout, the dockers' secretive mobilisation was unknown to union officials, and the union's intervention was initially resisted by strikers. However, the union did play a key role during the negotiation process after the union was able to be accepted and trusted by both the dockworkers and management. As one of the union officials said,

> Obviously we were under pressure when we were given such an important role to convince workers to resume production. But we were also proud of the fact that the union was the only organisation that was trusted by both the staff and the company senior management; … for the company, we are very important (Interview 7).

The union was accepted by workers because they 'didn't want to stand out by themselves as they might worry about job security; … so by the end they agreed that the union could represent them in negotiations' (Interview 7). With workers needing formal leadership the union acted as mediator and a coordinator to look after strikers' opinions. It was acknowledged by some workers that the union chair was popular because 'he is a great guy who has helped us a lot' (Interview 2). The final negotiation and settlement were also facilitated by the union as well. The contribution of the YICT union demonstrates the fact that union intervention can help to institutionalise conflict (Mills, 1948) and, in the case of China, to defuse conflict (Chen, 2010, p.105). As one union official suggested, collective

bargaining could happen during the dispute ‘when both management and workers accepted us as the formal “middle man” in negotiations’ (Interview 7). Nevertheless, this was only a one-off process, and since the end of the 2013 dispute, the union has not been given any official role to represent workers in collective bargaining.

Yantian dockers’ bargaining power

The dispute shows Yantian dockworkers’ great courage and capacity to defend their interests through unorganised action. It is likely that what workers learned in the 2007 dispute helped them to start another strike. As Edwards (1995) argues, there is an established habit to the use of strike, and ‘once it has become accepted as the means to resolve disputes, its use becomes taken for granted’ (p.450). But more importantly, it was dockworkers’ bargaining power that was able to help their successful campaign. Such power came from their jobs as the key operators in a busy container port, the extended support from more fellow colleagues and their effective mobilisation tactics.

First, Yantian dockers’ high degree of disruptive capacity is based on their structural power, mainly workplace bargaining power, relevant to the particular nature of the dock labour process and the use of modern cargo handling technology that has made the port operation more vulnerable to disruption. In 2012, YICT made a historical breakthrough by achieving 100 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent unit) annual throughput, a threshold

marking the port's world-class status (T. Wang, 2014). Such improvement in productivity and efficiency does mean that any disruption of production will cause significant damage to the company. Dockers believed that they were very important because 'most operation positions are not easy to be immediately substituted in the local labour market' (Interview 6), and once the strike started, the disruption 'could cost the company a lot of money in a very short period of time' (Interview 9).

Dockers' structural power also includes their logistical power. Although much of Yantian dockers' mobilisation process was not known to the public, and nobody has been identified as the strike leader, dockers effectively utilised social media, especially mobile phones and the internet, to communicate and mobilise. Their job did not allow them to gather often, but they found opportunities to be together when they were off work and exchanged ideas by using online chatrooms such as QQ and Wechat, through which some important conversations could be undertaken to determine the time and actions of the first stoppage (T. Wang, 2014). As a docker remembered: 'Concerned with the housing fund policy, crane operators felt deep pressure because their net income reduced more significantly….So before the strike started many colleagues spoke up about their feelings in the QQ chat rooms. The housing fund problem suddenly escalated the conflict…' (Interview 6). This type of logistical power strengthened dockers' preparation, as the cyberspace communication can 'provide the

opportunity to create new networks' that help workers to reconfigure space and coordinate campaigns (Webster et al., 2008, p.192).

Second, Yantian dockworkers did have certain level of associational power, although such power was limited. Despite the absence of union organising, there was a sense of collectivism among strikers, demonstrated by the extended strike participation, increasing from about a few hundred operators in 2007 to nearly the entire workforce in 2013. In addition, the union network was used by workers as many strikers were also workplace union committee members. During the dispute dockers used union office space as their base to discuss demands and negotiation strategies. As described by a senior union official, 'the small union meeting room was stuffed with the union committee members who were also on strike; … our first meeting took one hour before we could get a closer sense of workers' demand' (T. Wang, 2014).

Another type of associational power is dockers' moral power. Although dockers might have a lower degree of collectivity at work due to separated operation system, the discontent regarding pay and job intensification did strengthen their determination to unite together (Interview 6). As an operator said:

> The crane job is not easy as we all have back injuries. We are concerned about the consequences of working high above the ground, but this has not been taken care

of by the company. We cannot work too long and we might have to retire earlier, or transfer to another job' (Interview 4).

Such sentiment was shared by many dockers in Yantian. One tower crane operator admitted that he was deeply concerned about his health, as doctor had recommended him not to continue doing a dangerous and heavy job like crane operation. He said: 'I definitely cannot continue this job until 60 [when I retire]. It is not about income but the company must care about our health' (Interview 1). With the common interests relating to pay and working conditions, the sense of injustice and grievance made Yantian workers focus on finding the way in which these could be changed. When dockers had a common sense of grievance it was easier to form a united and powerful alliance.

Conclusion

The 2013 Yantian strike demonstrates Chinese dockers' collective resistance, just like their Hong Kong counterparts a few months earlier, against multinational capital in a globalised waterfront. Despite the absence of strong institutional support from official unions, Yantian dockers used alternative methods to mobilise themselves, showing the extent of Chinese workers' defiance of the labour regime and subordination (Gray, 2015). In many respects it reflects the strength of dockers with traditionally strong community and occupational culture, and the dynamics of job control and workers' bargaining power, especially the strong

structural power at the point of production (Silver, 2003). Such power came from dockworkers' position within the production process and the vulnerability of the container port operation that is shadowed by technological innovation and globalised supply chain. Social media offered dockers alternative means of logistical power, which was helpful for the campaign because it was less hindered by workplace management. The unorganised dockers were supported by large numbers of colleagues and the negotiations were assisted by the workplace union, offering a sense of associational power although such power was delicate and limited.

On the other hand, Yantian workers' bargaining power would not easily be materialised if the internal and external contexts were different, as the transformation of the labour movement in East Asia are not isolated from historical, cultural and political dimensions (Gray, 2015). Like Korea's labour movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Koo, 2001), Chinese workers' struggle is shaped by globalisation that has complex consequence for the formation of a new generation of working class, and the status of labour organisations is also adjusted by particular experiences of the country's changing labour regime (Gray, 2008, p. 28). More importantly, because economic globalisation has made container terminal operators extremely cautious about 'the high cost of any disruption to shipping in ports' (Turnball and Wass, p. 589), Yantian workers were able to succeed in this instance. In contrast with the 2013 Hong Kong dock strike which became a public event and drew world-wide attention,

the Yantian strike was not widely known due to the authority's censorship on media coverage. However, the two cases share a common feature, as they both helped workers to further understand the importance of collective action in protecting their rights. The Yantian case recapitulates the fact that the development of Chinese industrial relations is pertinent to unorganised workers who 'have imposed great pressures on employers' (Liu and Li, 2014, p.86). As Gray (2015, p. 151) highlights, the recent labour unrest in the country represents 'a qualitative shift towards a militant workers' consciousness capable of challenging Chinese labour subordination'. Yet like most collective disputes in contemporary China, such a victory can be only momentous because workers' protests are still 'constrained by existing political conditions' (Friedman and Lee, 2010, p.521). The headway of China's labour movement, like what has been happening in Yantian, will primarily depend on the unpredictable development of the region's political economy.

The event also manifests the dilemma of the highly-praised 'Yantian union model' in sustaining industrial peace. It may be plausible to claim that direct elections are generally positive, but they 'cannot solve everything' (Wang, 2013) since the so-called democratic election is hindered by political, institutional and structural problems (Howell, 2008, p.861). Yantian workers have not been given substantial democratic rights after the 2013 dispute and their workplace union, like those affiliated to ACFTU, has not changed much. Ironically just few months later, in May 2014, YICT was 'honoured' with the 'May 1st Labor Medal', the

ACFTU's highest award, for its 'excellent maintenance of the harmonious workplace labour relations' (Chinaports.org, 2014). At the same time, it was rumoured that a few strike activists had been quietly sacked by YICT after the dispute (Interview 6). Again, it is the political economy of Chinese labour that plays a major role to influence the extent of worker resistance and union reform, as well as employers' response (Gray, 2015). Hence Yantian workers may need the workplace union that can help enhance their bargaining power. Despite the dockers' strength to take collective action, such compromise and corporation are necessary, since there are always 'harsh realities of employment relationships' in the dockyard (Turnbull, 2001, p.372).

Interview list:

Interview 1, YICT tower crane operator, May 2015
Interview 2, YICT gantry crane operator, May 2015
Interview 3, YICT gantry crane operator, May 2015
Interview 4, YICT gantry crane operator, May 2015
Interview 5, YICT coach driver, May 2015
Interview 6, YICT engineer department, May 2015
Interview 7, YICT union official, August 2014
Interview 8, YICT union official, August 2014
Interview 9, YICT port security department, May 2015
Interview 10, YICT union official, May 2015

References:

Betcherman, G. (1991) Does technological change affect union wage bargaining power? *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *29*(3), 447-15.

Blyton, P. and Turnbull, P.(2004) *The dynamics of employee relations,* third edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan).

Carter, C., Stewart, C., Hogan, J. and Kornberger, M. (2003) The polyphonic spree: the case of the Liverpool dockers. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 34(4), 290-304.

Chen, F. (2010) Quadripartite interactions of strike settlement in China. *China Quarterly,* 201, 104–124.

Cheng, J. Y. (2014) The emergence of radical politics in Hong Kong: Causes and impact. *The China Review, 14*(1), 199-33.

CLB (2013) Labour unrest in China: the absence of collective bargaining, China Labour Bulletin, http://www.clb.org.hk.

Chinaports.org (2014) YICT was awarded 'May 1st Labour Medal', http://shenzhen.chinaports.org/News_info.htm?id=174748

Chinaworker.org (2013) HPH Shenzhen Yantian Workers Struck again, http://chinaworker.info/ccn/2013/09/03/3935/.

Cullinane, K., Fei, W. T., and Cullinane, S. (2004) Container terminal development in mainland china and its impact on the competitiveness of the port of Hong Kong. *Transport Reviews, 24*(1), 33-23.

Edwards, P.(1977) A critique of the Kerr-Siegel hypothesis of strikes and the isolated mass: A study of the falsification of sociological knowledge. *The Sociological Review*, 25(3), 551-574.

Edwards, P.(1995) Strikes and industrial conflict, in P.Edwards (ed.), *Industrial relations: Theories and practices*, (Oxford: Blackwell), pp.434-460

Friedman, E., and Lee, C. K. (2010) Remaking the world of Chinese labour: A 30-year retrospective. *British Journal of Industrial Relations, 48*(3), 507-26.

Gray, K. (2008) Korean workers and neoliberal globalization, (New York: Routledge).

Gray, K. (2015) *Labour and development in East Asia: Social forces and passive revolution*, (London: Routledge).

Hall, P.(2009) Container ports, local benefits and transportation worker earnings. *Geojournal, 74*(1), 67-16.

Hamark, J. (2013) Strikingly indifferent: The myth of militancy on the docks prior to world war II. *Labor History, 54*(3), 271-17.

Hiller, E. T. (1969) *The strike: A study in collective action*, (New York: Arno Press).

Howell, J. (2008) All-China Federation of Trades Unions beyond reform? The slow march of direct elections. *The China Quarterly*, 196, 845-863.

HPH (2012) Harnessing Our Strengths. Hutchison Port Holdings Trust 2013 annual report, http://www.hphtrust.com/misc/ar2012/ar2012_hi.pdf.

HPH (2013) Handling vessels any size any time: Hutchison Port Holdings Trust 2013 annual report. http://hphtrust.listedcompany.com/misc/ar2013/ar2013_l.pdf.

Hyman, R. (1984) *Strikes*, third edition, (London: Fontana).

Kerr, C. and Siegel, A. (1954) The inter industry propensity to strike: An international comparison. In A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin, and A. M. Ross (eds.), *Industrial Conflict* (pp.189-212), (McGraw Hill, New York), pp.189-212.

Koo, H. (2001) Korean workers: The culture and politics of class formation (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

Liu, M. and Li, C. (2014) Environment pressures, managerial industrial relations ideologies and unionisation in Chinese enterprises. *British Journal of Industrial relations*, 52(1): 82-111.

Lyddon, D., Cao, X., Meng, Q. and Lu, J. (2015) A strike of 'unorganised' workers in a Chinese car factory: the Nanhai Honda events of 2010. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 46(2), 134–152.

Martin, R. (1992) *Bargaining power*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Miller, R. (1969) The dockworker subculture and some problems in cross-cultural and cross-time generalizations. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 11*(3), 302-12.

Mills, C. W. (1948) *The new men of power*, (New York: Harcourt Brace).

Schwarz-Miller, A., and Talley, W. K. (2002) Technology and labor relations: Railroads and ports. *Journal of Labor Research, 23*(4), 513-20.

Silver, B. J. (2003) *Forces of labor: Workers' movements and globalization since 1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

SCMP. (2013) Everyone a loser after Hong Kong dock strike ends. South China Morning Post, May 8, 2013, http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1232519/strike-end-sees-all-involved-losers.

Thun, E. (2014) The globalization of production, in J. Ravenhill (ed.) *Global political economy*, fourth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.283-305.

Turnbull, P. (2000) Contesting globalisation on the waterfront. *Politics and Society, 28*(3), 367-25.

Turnbull, P. (2001) Rethinking dock work [Book Review]. *Labour History Review*, 66 (3), 367-380.

Turnbull, P., and Wass, C. (2007) Defending dock workers: Globalisation and labor relations in the world's ports. *Industrial Relations, 46*(3), 582-30.

Wang, K. (2014) An introduction of the development experience and future prospect of Shenzhen Yantian International Container Terminals. *Technological Innovation and Application*. 29, 13-14. Wang, T. (2013) Pass the power back to workers. *Chinese Worker*, http://www.chineseworkers.com.cn/_d276227433.htm.

Wang, T. (2014) The unbearable lightness of the collective consultation system: The process and reflection of the Yantian 9.1 strike. *Chinese Workers*, http://www.chineseworkers.com.cn/_d276640243.htm.

Webster, E., Lambert, R. and Bezuidenhout, A. (2008) *Grounding globalizations: Labour in the age of insecurity*, (Oxford: Blackwell).

Workers Daily (2011) YICT's wage collective consultation has led to 'two highs'. 25th July 2011.

WSJ.com (2013) Hong Kong strike hits tycoon's image, *Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 2013, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323550604578410233885297880 .

Wright, E. O. (2000) Working-class power, capitalist-class interests, and class compromise. *American Journal of Sociology, 105*(4), 957-45.

Xinhuanet. (2013) Strike broke out in Li Ka-Sing's dock, 29 March 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/gangao/2013-03/29/c_124519064.htm.